



Athlete Profile (National)

Jeffrey Sparks – From Tragedy Comes Help to Others

When Army veteran Jeffrey Sparks' helicopter crashed into a mountainside, he had no idea how that moment of tragedy would lead to a lifelong mission of helping prevent brain and spinal cord injuries to kids.

It was on July 9, 1988, that Sparks was assigned to co-pilot a helicopter carrying seven other soldiers who were searching for seven missing soldiers in the mountains of Idaho. The missing soldiers were eventually spotted, and while attempting to land the helicopter, there was a power failure. The aircraft crashed into the mountainside, wounding those on board and placing Sparks, who is now 46, in a wheelchair for life.

Less than a year later, Sparks competed in the 9th National Veterans Wheelchair Games in Long Beach, California. "My first time at the Games was exciting because I could see all of the things that other paralyzed veterans could do," he says. "As a new quadriplegic, I wasn't sure how much I could accomplish." Although Sparks only completed one of his events that year and did not receive a medal, he now says that his first national event gave him something he could not have gotten anywhere else – camaraderie. "It is just so great seeing your fellow veterans year after year, catching up on what they are doing, sharing what has been going on in your life and getting the opportunity to meet newcomers to the Games," he says. "I still look forward to coming back each year. I love helping the newcomers get assimilated to the Games. I have only missed four Games since my first trip in 1989; two because I was in school and one because I was sick." He plans to continue the annual tradition this year at the 27th National Veterans Wheelchair Games, being held in Milwaukee June 19-23. In 2006, he came home with a bronze medal in air guns and a silver in table tennis. This year, he'll also compete in nine-ball, shot-put and quad rugby.

In recent years, Sparks, who lives in Boise, Idaho, has taken an active role in teaching others how to prevent brain and spinal cord injuries like his own. "My desire to help others has transcended to helping kids, teaching them how to prevent these lifelong injuries," Sparks says. He has been an active member of Think First National Injury Prevention Foundation, formally known as the National Head and Spinal Cord Injury Prevention Program. Sparks serves as a coach and referee, and provides administrative support for the Boise region. Now, his days are filled with speaking to school age children from K-12 grades, helping organize a wheelchair sports camp for children, and volunteering with the Boise City Parks to help coordinate a wide range of activities for children who use wheelchairs.

At the National Veterans Wheelchair Games each year, Jeffrey Sparks brings back a lot of what he learns for the kids. He does it for a reason, he says. "If I can prevent one child from becoming brain injured or receiving a spinal cord injury, it will have been worth it."